

Mr. Robert and a Certain Party

By
SEWELL FORD

WE was havin' a directors' meetin'. Get that, do you? We, you know! For nowadays, as private sec. and actin' head of Mutual Funding, I crashes into all sorts of confidential pow-wows. Uh-huh! Right in where they put a crimp in the surplus and make plots to slip things over on the Commerce Board! Oh my, yes! I'm gettin' almost respectable enough to be indicted.

Well, we'd just pared the dividend on common and was about breakin' up the session when Mr. Robert misses some figures on export clearances he'd had made up and was pawin' about on the table aimless.

"Didn't I see you stowin' that away in one of your desk pigeonholes yesterday?" I suggests.

"By George!" says he. "Think you could find it for me, Torchey? And, by the way, bring along my cigarettes too. You will find them in a leather case somewhere about."

I locates the export notes first stab; but the dope sticks ain't in sight. I claws through the whole top of the desk before I fin'ly discovers, shoved clear into a corner, a thin old blue morocco affair with a gold catch. By the time I gets back he's smokin' a borrowed brand and tosses the case one side.

Half an hour later the meetin' is over. Mr. Robert sighs relieved, bunches up a lot of papers in front of him, and begins feelin' absentminded in his pockets. Sec'in' which I pushes the leather case at him.

"Ah, yes, thanks," says he, and snaps it open careless.

BUT no neat little row of paper pipes shows up. Inside is nothing but a picture, one of these dinky portraits on ivory—mini'tures, ain't they? It shows a young lady with a perky chin and kind of a quizzin' look in her eyes; not a reg'lar front row pippin', you know, but a fairly good looker of the highbrow type that would get over.

For a second Mr. Robert stares at the portrait foolish, and then he glances up quick to see if I'm watchin'. As it happens, I am, and blamed if he don't tint up over it!

"Excuse," says I. "Only leather case I could find. Besides, I didn't know you had any such souvenirs as this on your desk."

He chuckles throaty. "Nor I," says he. "That is, I'd almost forgotten. You see—"

"I see," says I. "She's one of the discards, eh?"

Sort of jolts him, that does. "Eh?" says he. "A discard? No, no! I—er—I suppose, if I must confess, Torchey, that I am one of hers."

"Gwan!" says I. "You? Look like a discard, don't you? Tush, tush!"

The idea of him tryin' to feed that to me! Why, say, I expect there ain't half a dozen bachelors in town that's rated any higher on the eligible list than Mr. Bob Ellins. It's no dark secret, either. I've heard of whole summer campaigns bein' planned just to land Mr. Robert, of house parties made up special to give some fair young queen a chance at him, and of one enterprisin' young widow that chased him up for two seasons before she quit.

How he's been able to dodge the net so long has puzzled more than me, and up to date I'd never had a hint that there was such a thing for him as a certain party. So I expect I was gawpin' some curious at the picture.

"Huh!" says I, but more or less to myself.

"Not intending any adverse criticism of the young lady, I trust?" remarks Mr. Robert.

"Far be it from me!" says I. "Only—"

"HONEST, I couldn't figure why a headliner like Mr. Robert should get the gate on any kind of a matrimonial proposition. Who was this finicky party with the willow-ware eyes, anyway? Was it wings she was demandin'?"



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well, maybe the paintin' don't do her justice."

"Rather discreetly phrased, that," says he, chucklin' quiet. "Thank you, Torchey. And you are quite right. No mere painter ever could do her full justice. While the likeness is excellent, the flesh tones much as I remember them, yet I fancy a great deal has escaped the brush,—the queer, quirky little smile, for instance, that used to come at times in the mouth corners, a quick tilting of the chin as she talked, and that trick of widening the eyes as she looked at you. China blue, I think her eyes would be called; rather unusual eyes, in fact."

He seems to be enjoyin' the monologue; so I don't break in, but just stands there while he gazes at the picture and holds forth enthusiastic. Even after he's finished he still sits there starin'.

"Gee!" says I. "It ain't a hopeless case, is it, Mr. Robert?"

Which brings him out of his spell. He shrugs his shoulders, indulges in an unconvinced little laugh, snaps the case shut, and then tosses it careless down onto the table.

"Perhaps you failed to notice the dust," says he. "The back part of the bottom drawer is where that belongs, Torchey—or in the waste basket. It's quite hopeless, you see."

"Huh!" says I as I turns to go. And

this time I meant to get it across to him.

Honest, I couldn't figure why a headliner like Mr. Robert, with all his good bank ratin', good fam'ly, and good looks to back him, should get the gate on any kind of a matrimonial proposition, unless it was a case of coppin' a Princess of royal blood, and even then I'd back him to show in the runnin'. Who was this finicky party with the willow-ware eyes, anyway? Queen of what? Or was it wings she was demandin'?

SAY, I most got peeved with this unknown that had ditched Mr. Robert so hard. All that evenin' I mulls over it, wonderin' how long ago it had happened and if that accounted for him bein' so eagy in makin' social dates. Not that he's what you'd call skirt-shy exactly; but I've noticed that he's always cautious about bein' backed into a corner or paired off with any special one.

Course, not knowin' the details of the tragedy, it wa'n't much use speculatin'. And somehow I didn't feel like askin' for the whole story right out. You know—there's times when you just can't. I ain't any more curious than usual over this special case, either; but, sec'in' how many good turns Mr. Robert's done for me along the only-girl line, I got to wishin' there was some way I could sort of balance the account.

So when I stumbles across this concert folder it almost looks like a special act, with the arrow pointin' my way. I was payin' my reg'lar official Friday evenin' call. No, nothin' romantic. Just because Auntie's mellowed up a bit since I'm announced proper by the front door help as Mr. Ballard, don't get tangled up with the idea that she stands for any dark corner twosin'. Nothin' like that! All the lights are on full blast, Auntie's right there prominent with her crochet, and on the other side of the table is me and Vee. And I couldn't be behavin' more innocent if I'd been roped to the chair. All I was holdin' was a skein of yarn. Uh-huh! You see, Vee got the knittin' habit last winter, turnin' out stuff for the Belgians, and now she keeps right on; though who she's goin' to wish a pink and white shawl onto in this weather is a myst'ry.

"It's for a sufferer—isn't that enough?" says she.

"From what—chilblains on the ears?" says I.

"Silly!" says she. "There! Didn't I tell you to bend your thumbs? How awkward!"

"Who, me?" says I. "Why, for a first attempt I thought I was puttin' up a real classy performance. Say, lemme wind awhile, and let's see you try this yarn-jugglin' act."

She won't, though; so it's me sittin' there playin' dummy, with my arms held out stiff and my eyes roamin' around restless.

WHICH is how I happen to spot this folder with the halftone cut on it. It's been tossed casual on the table, and the picture is wrong side to from where I am; but even then there's something mighty familiar about it. I wiggles around to get a better view, and lets half a dozen loops of yarn slip off at a time.

"Stupid!" says Vee, runnin' her tongue out at me.

"Didn't I tell you you'd do better by drapin' it over a chair back?" says I. "But say, time out while I snoop into something. Who's the girl with the press notice stuff?" and I points an elbow at the halftone.

"That?" says she. "Oh, some concert singer, I think. Let's see. Yes—Miss Elsa Hampton. She's to give a benefit song recital in the Plutonia pink room for the Belgian war orphans, tickets two dollars. Want to go?" And Vee flips the folder into my lap.

Gettin' the picture right side to, I lets out a whistle. No mistakin' that. "Sure I want to go," says I.

"Why?" says Vee.

"Well, for one thing," says I, "she has China blue eyes that widen out when they look at you, and a queer, quirky little smile that—"

"How thrilling!" says Vee. "You must know her very well."

"Almost that," says I. "Anyway, I know someone that did know her very well—once."

"Oh!" says Vee, forgettin' all about the yarn windin' and hitchin' her chair up close. "That does sound interesting. I hope it isn't a deep secret."

"If it wa'n't," says I, "what would be the fun in tellin' it to you?"

"Goody!" says Vee. "Who is the poor man who knew her once but doesn't any more?"

"Whisper!" says I. "It's Mr. Bob Ellins!"

"Wha-a-at!" gasps Vee. "Do you really mean it?"

I'd pulled a sensation, all right, and for the next half-hour she keeps me busy tryin' to explain the details of a situation I hadn't more'n half sketched out myself.

"Kept a miniature of her on his desk!" Vee rattles on. "And it hadn't been